

Thorndon Birdlife, December 2013 and January 2014

It's hard to believe that 2013 is drawing to a close, but as we rug-up to keep the winter chill at bay at least we can look back on having had some decent summer weather this year.

There are two classic winter thrushes to look out for over the next couple of months, the redwings that I mentioned last month and fieldfares. I saw about 30 fieldfares on 14th November, flying over towards Thwaite and you may well encounter both species feeding on berries in trees, shrubs and hedgerows, as well as feeding on the ground on windfall fruit.



Redwings look superficially similar to song thrushes in that they are brown above and paler below with black spots, but if you see them well you will notice that they are a little darker on the upperparts than a song thrush and whiter on the underparts. In addition, they have a very obvious pale stripe over the eye (the supercilium), which gives them a slightly more aggressive look than the open-faced, benign-looking song thrush. You can also see the

reddish colour on the sides of the body underneath the closed wing (the red under the wing, from which the bird gets its name, is quite hard to see).

Fieldfares are much bigger, about the size of a mistle thrush, and have a similarly languid flight action and rather long-tailed look. They are blue-grey on the head and rump, with a vinous-brown back and breast patch, which contrasts with the whiter belly. They also have a noticeably yellow bill.



I was very pleased to receive a report of another grey wagtail, this time from a stream in a resident's garden. From the description it sounds like a different individual from the one I saw along the Clint Road in October.

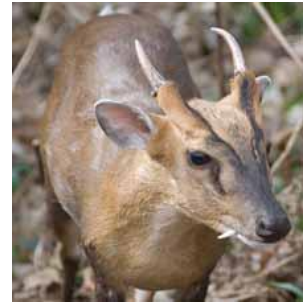


I was also pleased to hear of a siskin being seen in a garden along The Street. These small finches like to feed in alder trees but are also very keen on peanuts in mesh bags and niger seed, so you may see them at your garden feeding station over the winter. The males are strikingly green and yellow, with a black forehead, whilst the females are less brightly coloured but are very heavily marked with dark streaks.

This year the field behind my house was ploughed on a lovely sunny day and I was able to enjoy the black-headed and common gulls that were following the plough at close quarters. Interestingly, all the common gulls were first-winters, which is to say

that they were all birds that hatched this year and are now in their first winter. It is possible to tell the ages of many birds from their plumage and gulls are a good group to practice this on. Black-headed gulls, the commonest species in our part of the world, take two years to reach maturity, whereas common gulls take three years.

Last month I mentioned hearing tawny owls calling and I have recently heard another sound of the cold, clear nights that has become quite familiar over recent decades: the call of the muntjac deer. This short, rather harsh call sounds almost dog-like and indeed the muntjac is known as the barking deer in other parts of its range.



The most surprising report I received during November was of a goshawk. These powerful raptors are quite rare in Suffolk but there are a few breeding pairs and others occur as migrants and winter visitors. They are superficially similar to a sparrow hawk but are much bigger (the size of a common buzzard) and are consequently very impressive.

With the weather forecast to become markedly colder in the first part of the winter now is the time to be feeding the birds in your garden if you haven't already started. Sunflower seeds and sunflower hearts will attract greenfinches, goldfinches and chaffinches and niger seed may well attract redpolls and siskins. Lots of birds, including great spotted woodpeckers and nuthatches, enjoy peanuts and great tits, blue tits, coal tits, long-tailed tits, house sparrows, starlings and robins like suet and fat. If you put mealworms or grated cheese down on the ground your blackbirds, robins and dunnocks will benefit.

I should like to take this opportunity to thank the many readers who have contacted me over the course of the year to report their sightings and to ask questions. I look forward to an interesting and wildlife-filled year ahead.

With best wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

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It is also important to make sure that your garden birds have access to clean water to drink and bathe in.